

TELECOMMUNICATIONS CONNECTOR PROTECTIVE DEVICE

Technical Field

The present invention relates generally to protective devices for telecommunications connectors.

Background

Telecommunications cables are often pre-terminated by a manufacturer or a supplier. These pre-terminated cables may be configured to standard or custom lengths and may have one or both ends terminated. The connectors attached to the ends of these cables may be susceptible to damage or contamination during transportation from the manufacturer or supplier to a warehouse, storage facility or installation site. Damage to these connectors and cable ends may result in lost time to repair the connectors as well as possible signal degradation.

Improvements to protecting the ends of telecommunications cable connectors are desirable.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention relates to a cover assembly for a fiber optic connector mounted to an end of and terminating a fiber optic cable. The cover includes an open sided box and a lid sized to engage the open side. The box and the lid define a cavity sized to fit about and receive a fiber optic connector. The cavity has an open end adapted to receive the optical fiber cable. The fiber optic connector is held within the cavity and the cable extends through the open end, with the lid engaging the open side and sealing the cavity from contaminants outside the cavity.

Further, the present invention relates to a fiber optic connector assembly with a fiber optic connector mounted to a fiber optic cable and including a ferrule with an end face terminating the fiber. A plug is configured to fit about and engage the ferrule of

the fiber optic connector to seal the end face from contaminants. An adhesive tape is releasably attached to the connector about the plug, holding the plug to the connector.

Further, the present invention relates to a sleeve, the first end of which fits about a ferrule of a telecommunications connector with the end face of the ferrule within an axial opening of the sleeve. A plug is inserted into a second opposing end of the sleeve. The sleeve fits closely about both the ferrule and the plug to prevent entry of airborne contaminants into the axial opening through either end.

Still further, the present invention relates to a body including an axial opening with a first end and an opposing second end. A ferrule of a fiber optic connector is placed within the axial opening through the first end so that a polished end face of the ferrule is within the axial opening. A removable adhesive sealing member is placed over the second end of the axial opening. The body fits about the ferrule to prevent entry of airborne contaminants into the axial opening through the first end and the sealing member prevents entry of airborne contaminants into the axial opening through the second end.

The present invention also relates to a method of sealing a telecommunications connector against airborne contaminants comprising terminating a fiber optic cable with a fiber optic connector in a clean environment protected against airborne contaminants. An end of an optical fiber within the cable is terminated at a polished end face of a ferrule of the connector. Within the clean environment, a seal is placed about the ferrule to protect the polished end face of the ferrule including the end of the optical fiber against airborne contaminants. The connector is then transported to a location where a fiber optic communications linkage is desired. The seal is then removed from the connector and the communications linkage is made without cleaning the end face of the connector.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of the description, illustrate several aspects of the invention and together with the detailed description, serve to explain the principles of the invention. A brief description of the drawings is as follows:

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a telecommunications connector clamshell protective device according to the present invention.

FIG. 2 is a side view of the protective device of FIG. 1 with the lid closed and the foam sealing blocks and the telecommunications cable and connector indicated with dashed lines.

FIG. 3 is a side view of a second embodiment of a telecommunications connector protective device according to the present invention with the lid closed and the foam sealing blocks and the telecommunications cable and connector indicated with dashed lines.

FIG. 4 is a perspective view of a third embodiment of a telecommunications connector plug protective device according to the present invention.

FIG. 5 is a cross-sectional view of the protective device of FIG. 4 mounted on a fiber optic connector.

FIG. 6 is a partial cross-sectional view of the protective device of FIG. 4.

FIG. 7 is a side view of a fourth embodiment of a telecommunications connector protective device.

FIG. 8 is a side view of a fifth embodiment of a telecommunications connector protective device.

FIG. 9 is an end view of the protective device of FIG. 8.

Detailed Description

Reference will now be made in detail to exemplary aspects of the present invention which are illustrated in the accompanying drawings. Wherever possible, the same reference numbers will be used throughout the drawings to refer to the same or similar parts.

When a telecommunications connector is installed in an operational environment, dust and other contaminants may degrade the level of signal that is transmitted through the connector and the communications circuit to which the connector is attached. These contaminants may be introduced into the communication circuit at any time from when the connector is assembled (such as in a factory) to when the connector

is inserted within a mating adapter (such as in an interconnect panel or other connection device). By assembling connectors in a relatively clean factory environment and providing a secure and removable shield for the connector, the potential for contaminants being introduced into such a communications circuit may be minimized.

Referring now to FIG. 1, a telecommunications connector 16 is shown within a clamshell protective device 10. Clamshell device 10 includes a box 12 and a lid 14 hingedly mounted to each other by hinge 13. Alternatively, box 12 and lid 14 may be separate elements without hinge 13 or other connection extending between them. Connector 16 is mounted to the end of and terminates a telecommunications cable 18. As shown, connector 16 is an optical fiber connector commonly referred to as an FC connector and cable 18 is an optical fiber cable including a strand of optical fiber terminated at a ferrule 17. Other styles and formats of optical fiber connectors and high speed copper connectors are also contemplated within the scope of the present invention. The amount of data that may be transmitted through any of these connector types may be impeded by contaminants and use of a protective device such as device 10 may provide protection from the introduction of such contaminants.

Connector 16 is received within a recess 20 of box 12. A slot 22 receives cable 18. Cable 18 also passes across a first foam block 24 mounted within recess 20 adjacent slot 22. Block 24 may be formed of a deformable resilient foam to permit block 24 to conform the diameter of cable 18 and prevent entry of contaminants into recess 20 through slot 22. A mating foam block 26 is included on lid 14 which cooperates with block 24 to assist in sealing around cable 18. Alternatively, either of blocks 24 or 26 may be made of a material capable of conforming to the full diameter of cable 18 so that the other mating block may be formed of a relatively non-deformable material. The non-deformable block may be integrally formed as part of either lid 14 or box 12 so that fewer components are needed to assemble device 10.

Block 26 is within a mating recess 32 of lid 14. Recess 32 includes perimeter walls 34 extending about lid 14. Walls 34 engage mating surfaces 30 of box 12 about recess 20 and cooperate to seal recesses 32 and 20 against contaminants reaching connector 16 when device 10 is closed as shown in FIG. 2. Walls 34 and mating surfaces 30 may be snap fit with each other when lid 14 is mated with box 12, as shown in FIG. 2,

and the snap fit may be close enough to prevent entry of contaminants. Alternatively, walls 34 and mating surfaces 30 may be bonded to each other, such as with glue, heat sealing, ultrasonic welding or other techniques, to provide additional protection against the entry of contaminants. FIG. 2 also shows foam blocks 24 and 26 of protective device 10 of FIG. 1 cooperating to seal about cable 18 to prevent entry of contaminants into device 10.

Adjacent mating surfaces 30 about recess 20 are flanges 36. Adjacent perimeter walls 34 about recess 32 are flanges 38. As an alternative to bonding perimeter walls 34 to mating surfaces 30, flanges 32 and 34 may be bonded to each other, such as with glue, heat sealing, ultrasonic welding or other techniques.

Referring now to FIG. 3, a second embodiment of a protective device 110 is shown with a lid 114 and a box 112 connected by hinge 13. Device 110 differs from device 10 in that box 12 and lid 14 are approximately equal in depth, whereas box 12 is substantially deeper than lid 14. Recess 32 of lid 14, as shown in FIG. 2, may only extend to the depth needed to define perimeter walls 34. Recess 132 of lid 114 extends to a greater depth than required to define perimeter walls 34, as shown in FIG. 3. As shown in FIG. 2, connector 16 is positioned substantially within recess 20 of box 12 and only a small portion of connector 16 extends within recess 32 of box 14. As shown in FIG. 3, connector 16 extends within both recess 132 and a recess 120 of box 112 approximately equally. A pair of foam blocks 124 and 126 are positioned adjacent an end of device 110 opposite hinge 13 to permit entry of cable 18 into device 110 and to seal about cable 18 against the entry of contaminants.

While devices 10 and 110 protect an end of cable 18 terminated at ferrule 17 from contaminants as described above, these devices also provide some protection from impact or other physical damage that may adversely affect the ability of connector 16 to interface with other elements of the telecommunications circuit. As is well known in the prior art, telecommunications connectors such as connector 16 include features which mate with adapters or other components and which may provide a secure and sealed interface for the transmission of signals, either optical or electrical. These mating features also need to be protected from contaminants as well as from physical damage.

Devices 10 and 110 provide protection to these mating and locking features of connector 16 as well as to ferrule or cable termination 17.

Referring now to FIGS. 4 to 6, a plug protective device 52 for protecting an end face 50 of ferrule 17 of telecommunications connector 16 is shown. Plug 52 includes a body 58 and a larger diameter portion 60 defining a shoulder 64 between. An inner cylindrical opening 56 is defined within plug 52 for receiving and sealing about ferrule 17. When plug 52 is positioned about ferrule 17 as shown in FIG. 5, the seal between an inner wall 59 of body 58 within a cylindrical cavity 56 forms an air-tight seal, so that air is compressed within cavity 56 between end face 50 and an inner end wall 66. To prevent this compressed air from forcing plug 52 from about ferrule 17 and allowing contaminants to come into contact with end face 50, a tape 54 is positioned about plug 52 to hold plug 52 to connector 16. Tape 54 may include an anti-tamper feature which will indicate if tape 54 has been removed and replaced or otherwise disturbed. If this anti-tamper feature indicates that tape 54 has been disturbed, this may indicate the seal between plug 52 and ferrule 17 has been broken and that end face 50 may have been exposed to contaminants. Tape 54 may also be mounted to connector 16 and plug 52 with a tail 55 to facilitate the removal of tape 54 and plug 52 from connector 16.

As shown, ferrule 17 is inserted within cavity 56 of plug 52 through an opening 62. To assist in the alignment and entry of ferrule 17 into cavity 56, a tapered entry 63 into opening 62 may be provided. At the inner end of taper 63, adjacent inner wall 59, a smaller diameter ledge 68 is formed. It is anticipated that plug 52 will be made of a resilient deformable material such as a thermoplastic elastomer. Ledge 68 should promote the formation of an airtight seal about ferrule 17 by deforming to closely match the outer surface of ferrule 17 as plug 52 is mounted to connector 16. Ledge 68 may also serve to brush off surface contaminants from the outer surface of ferrule 17 as plug 52 is placed about ferrule 17 and ensure that these contaminants do not enter cavity 56. Shoulder 64 provides a finger hold to aid in the removal of plug 52 from connector 16.

Referring now to FIG. 7, a fourth embodiment of a protective device 70 includes a plug 72 and a sleeve 74. A first end 82 of sleeve 74 is sized to be received about ferrule 17 of connector 16 so that end face 50 is within an axial opening 75 of sleeve 74. Axial opening 75 is defined by an interior wall 73. In FIG. 7, axial opening

75 is shown enlarged greater than the diameter of ferrule 17 for clarity. However, axial opening 75 is sized to fit closely to ferrule 17 to prevent contaminants from passing through first end 82 along ferrule 17 to reach end face 50. As shown, axial opening 75 is consistent in diameter from first end 82 to a second end 84. Plug 72 includes a shaft 78 which similarly sized to ferrule 17 and is inserted through second end 84 into axial opening 75. Shaft 78 includes a mating portion 76 sized and shaped to approximate the polished shape of end face 50. Mating portion 76, as shown, is concave and forms a contour to match the polished convex shape of end face 50. Mating portion 76 is shown offset from end face 50 for clarity in FIG. 7. However, in use, mating portion 76 will be in close proximity or contact with end face 50 to further provide protection against contaminants reaching end face 50.

Other polish profiles for end face 50 are known and it is anticipated that mating portion 76 may be shaped as appropriate to match these known polish profiles. It is also anticipated that mating portion 76 may be shaped to match new polish profiles that may be developed, within the scope of the present invention. Plug 72 also includes an enlarged end 80 opposite shaft 78. Enlarged end 80 provides a finger grip for removing device 70 from ferrule 17 of connector 16.

As shown, mating end 76 is offset from end face 50 for clarity. However, end face 50 and mating face 76 would be positioned directly adjacent each other so that mating face 76 may block contaminants from reaching end face 50. As axial opening 75 is uniform in diameter and shaft 78 is similarly sized to ferrule 17, contaminants are prevented from entering axial opening 75 through second end 84 as well.

Referring now to FIGS. 8 and 9, a fifth embodiment of a protective device 90 includes a body 96 with a flange 94 at a second end 104. Body 96 includes an inner wall 98 which defines an interior opening 100 extending between a first end 102 and second end 104. Interior opening 100 is sized to be received about ferrule 17 so that end face 50 is within opening 100 and inner wall 98 fits closely about ferrule 17 to prevent contaminants from entering opening 100 through first end 102. With such an air-tight or near air-tight seal between ferrule 17 and inner wall 98, second end 104 of body 96 is open to permit ferrule 17 to be inserted within opening 100 and allowing displaced air to escape. Once ferrule 17 has been placed within opening 100, an adhesive member 92,

such as tape, is then placed across end 104 to provide an air-tight seal of second end 104 and prevent contaminants from entering opening 100 through second end 104.

As shown, member 92 extends beyond a flanged portion 94 of body 96, so that member 92 may be removed to permit protective device 90 to be withdrawn from ferrule 17. Flanged portion 94 provides a finger grip to aid in the removal of body 96 from ferrule 17. Alternatively, member 92 could be sized to more closely match the size and shape of flanged portion 94 with a single tab extending beyond flanged portion 94 to permit removal of member 92.

While several embodiments of protective devices have been described herein, a generalized procedure for protecting telecommunications connectors from airborne contaminants applicable to many of these embodiments is within the scope of the present invention as well. This generalized procedure begins with a fiber optic cable being terminated with a fiber optic connector in a clean factory environment. An optical fiber within the cable is positioned within a ferrule of the connector and an end face of the ferrule and the end of the fiber adjacent the end face are polished to the desired polish profile. Once the end face has been finished and before the connector is removed from the clean factory environment, a seal is applied to the connector to protect the end face from airborne contaminants.

The protection procedure also includes transporting the protected connector to a location where a fiber optic communications linkage is desired. This location may be in an environment where the air is not as protected from airborne contaminants as the factory environment. Further, during transportation or storage, it is desirable that the end face of the connector be protected from airborne or other contaminants as well. Once at the location of the desired telecommunications connection, the seal may be removed from the connector and the linkage may be completed without the need for cleaning of the end face in the field.

The creation of the seal about the end face and removal of the seal prior to making the linkage may be performed by the methods and devices described above.

The embodiments of the inventions disclosed herein have been discussed for the purpose of familiarizing the reader with novel aspects of the present invention. Although preferred embodiments have been shown and described, many changes,

modifications, and substitutions may be made by one having skill in the art without unnecessarily departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention. Having described preferred aspects and embodiments of the present invention, modifications and equivalents of the disclosed concepts may readily occur to one skilled in the art. However, it is intended that such modifications and equivalents be included within the scope of the claims which are appended hereto.